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The Meanings of Kansas: Rhetoric, Regions, and Counter-Regions

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ABSTRACT

This essay uses the Kansas reception of Truman Capote's 1966 *In Cold Blood* to reflect on processes of regionalism and resistance. Noting that Capote and *In Cold Blood* were articulated quite differently in different portions of the state of Kansas, I explain how Kansans used a text that was imposed on them to craft for themselves regional identities of their own making. I call these "counter regions," a term I coin to emphasize that region making is an important, if often overlooked, ingredient in practices of cultural resistance.

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In his biography of Truman Capote, Gerald Clarke claims that *In Cold Blood* took Kansas's Finney County by storm, transforming southwest Kansas into "Capote country" (358). This is partially true. Capote did indeed take Finney County and, for that matter, the entire state of Kansas by storm. Prompted by the 1959 murder of farmer Herbert Clutter and his family in Holcomb, Kansas, Capote told the story of how, why, and to what effect two men murdered four people they had never known. He called it, simply, his "Kansas Book" (Clarke, *Too Brief* 297), and when the *New Yorker* serialized it in the fall of 1965, Garden City drugstore proprietor Bob Renick boasted he could sell 1000 copies—998 more than his standard monthly allotment (qtd. in Grove 1). As Garden City's editor Bill Brown put it, "To those of us who lived so close to the story . . . "In Cold Blood" is compelling reading" ("In Cold Blood" 1).

Compelling reading it may have been, but the Kansas investment in Capote's tale hardly transformed Finney County into Capote Country. Quite the opposite. Kansans may have felt compelled to read, but the terms in which they talked about Capote and *In Cold Blood* ensured that neither Finney County nor any other county in Kansas would ever be mistaken for Capote

Country.¹ Kansans, you see, did not passively accept the regional markers distributed by Capote. Rather, they used the terms imposed on them—the terms of Capote and *In Cold Blood*—to constitute and fashion for themselves regions of their own making. That is to say, Capote and *In Cold Blood* were integral to what Douglass Reichert Powell has called “region making”: the rhetorical processes by which particular spaces accrue particular meanings (8).

Unlike counties, cities, and states, regions are not “stable, boundaried . . . places.” Rather, Powell argues, regions are defined by the ways in which particular geographic places intersect with “broader configurations of history, politics, and culture” (5, 18). In a similar vein, Doreen Massey argues that any given space is a “product of interrelations” (9). Appalachia, Southern California, and the Bible Belt are all good examples, the terms denoting geographic areas marked off by their relation to larger cultural mores. The craft of region making, then, is a fundamentally rhetorical one: for what besides rhetoric could tie particular patches of land with the broader configurations of political culture? Otherwise put, senses of place and senses of region require affective ties that bind together the materiality of topography with the much less tangible realm of cultural politics. Thus Powell: “A region is not a thing so much as a cultural history, an ongoing rhetorical and poetic construction” (6). At the heart of this construction is the building of contingent bridges, the forging of tenuous links, the *articulation* of people, places, institutions, and ideologies that would not otherwise coexist in the same formation.

Consider *In Cold Blood*. Using a murder and U.S. Highway 50 as his links, Capote connected the wheat-bound, God-fearing people of Southwest Kansas to urban problems of violence and maladjustment. By rearticulating topographies, cultural norms, and habits of living, *In Cold Blood* was itself a form of region making: it challenged the popular image of rural Kansas by placing it in the same assemblage as random violence and anxious citizens. William

Lindsay White knew this. From his post at the helm of the *Emporia Gazette*, White claimed that Capote had "recreated our Middle West" (4).

Perhaps he did. I'm going to insist, however, that Capote was hardly the only—or even the most important—actor in the 1960s fight over what *In Cold Blood* said about the meaning of Kansas. Although they did so in different ways in different places throughout the state, Kansans used Capote and *In Cold Blood* to form their own networks; they rearticulated both the author and his texts in order to give their own plots of land a meaning they could live with. They met region making with region making: it is as if they knew that regionalism was a critical practice, an "architecture of resistance," as Kenneth Frampton famously put it (16). Although the scholarly conversation has all but effaced the efforts of Kansans to redeploy *In Cold Blood* and make it serve their own ends, the fact remains that Kansans simply refused to let Truman Capote have the last word on the meaning of Kansas.²

The end result of their efforts is a new regional map of Kansas. A map on which the various Kansas regions are demarcated only by the differential reception of Truman Capote and *In Cold Blood*. That is, as different people, in different parts of the state, placed Capote and *In Cold Blood* into networks of their own choosing, the self-made regions of Kansans—we might call them *counter regions*—began to appear. It is worth stressing that these counter regions appear always and only in the most delicate of relief. Historically speaking, their visibility has been occluded by two generations of scholarship enthralled with the sheer eloquence of Capote, endless meditations on violence, and, above all, the international debate over whether or not *In Cold Blood* inaugurated a new literary genre. All weighty matters no doubt, but these were not the terms on which Kansans received and articulated Truman Capote. The tyranny of these terms in the national (and scholarly) conversation has rendered invisible the counter regions Kansans

forged by and against Truman Capote. To make these counter regions visible requires what I shall call a *regional hermeneutic*: a reading practice that is attuned to articulation, spatial differentiation, and the ways a text can be made to function as a conduit, connecting a particular locality with distant institutions and abstract ideologies.

In what follows, I attempt just this sort of cartography. I trace the differential reception of Capote and *In Cold Blood* in two distinct spaces in order to map for the first time certain regional sensibilities. The first is a region that extended from Holcomb some 75 miles south to Liberal and 135 miles east to the central Kansas towns of Great Bend and Pratt. The lifeblood of this region can be found on the editorial pages of the *Garden City Telegram*, the *Dodge City Daily Globe*, and Liberal's *Southwest Daily Times*. Although this region is animated by its proximity to Holcomb, I hesitate to label it a *local* region. As we shall see, the networks it activates stretch the length of the state, and there is only a very limited sense in which the denizens of southwest Kansas responded to Capote *as locals*. Instead I shall refer to it as a *disciplinary* region. I do this not out of any affection for Foucault, but because when southwest Kansans thought about Capote, the first thing they thought about was punishment and the various institutions across the state that influenced the punishment of crime.

Second, approximately 200 miles away, a region was constituted in and by the editorial pages of newspapers from the central Kansas cities of Hutchinson, Wichita, Topeka, and Emporia. I designate this region a *modern* region, not because other portions of the state were pre-, post-, or anti-modern, but because when central Kansans talked about Capote, they also talked about the modernization of Kansas.

Against Capote's image of a lonesome, wheat-bound, violence-ridden state, then, stands these two counter regions: a disciplinary region and a modern region. The fact that these regions

were created by and for Kansans must not hide the fact that they were created, as it were, on Capote's back: it was his writing and his journey from New York, through Topeka, to Holcomb that made all this region making possible in the first place. In the pages that follow, I examine in detail these two counter regions and then conclude with some preliminary reflections on *regional hermeneutics* as a rhetorical methodology.

A Disciplinary Region

In southwest Kansas, the sheer proximity of violence had numerous consequences on the reception of *In Cold Blood*. Most immediately, in a manner not replicated at greater distances, there was a demand for historical fidelity. When Capote's story went public six years after the murders, the first thing that Liberal's *Southwest Daily Times* and Garden City's *Telegram* did was to publish the reactions of those who had lived through it ("Finney County Residents" 4; "The Distaff Side" 4; "Mixed Emotions in Holcomb" 1). Such reactions were mixed. Some found Capote spot on, others found him misleading, but all agreed that fidelity to a personally experienced traumatic event was the primary axis on which the evaluation of Capote must turn.

This much is hardly surprising. Of course those who lived through the event would check Capote's account against their own memories. But the first-hand experience of the events of November 1959 was quickly translated into a series of demands placed on Capote that far exceeded the minimum threshold of historical fidelity. From the perspective of locals, getting the facts right was only Capote's first—and easiest—obligation. Beyond this, those closest to the Clutter farmhouse demanded that Capote treat the events of 1959 with a proper mode of engagement, a style befitting the scale of the violence, and, above all, a knowledge of the criminals that was properly calibrated to the violence of their crime. While locals generally agreed that Capote was close enough on his facts, there was far more controversy regarding his

mode of engagement. Just how did Capote know these murderers? What sort of knowledge was it that brought them back to life on the pages of *In Cold Blood*? And most importantly, was it a form of knowledge consistent with their preferred form of justice: capital punishment?

In southwest Kansas, anxieties thus persisted over Capote's explicit recourse to social science as a means of reanimating murderers Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. It is not that locals had anything against social science *per se*, it simply seemed to them that in the case at hand, the psychiatry Capote imported from Topeka threatened their own commitment to capital punishment. At the time, Topeka's famed Menninger clinic was actively pursuing the integration of "science"—by which they meant "psychiatry"—and juridical practice (Menninger 26). Through a lecture tour and a popular volume titled *The Crime of Punishment*, Menninger argued that science and, more specifically, psychiatry (these terms were virtually interchangeable for Menninger) posed a fundamental challenge to traditional modes of jurisprudence. For this reason, Topeka and Lansing stood at odds with each other in the regional imagination of southwest Kansas. Home of the Kansas State Penitentiary and the officially designated spot for state executions, Lansing functioned metonymically as a site of opposition to the science peddled by Menninger. While Capote, we might say, paved an expressway between Holcomb and Topeka and called into question the right of passage to Lansing and its gallows, the citizens of southwest Kansas reversed the respective strength of these ties.

The ties that bound psychiatry, Topeka, and Capote together in the cultural imagination of southwest Kansas are nowhere more conspicuous than in the extended coverage of *In Cold Blood* by the *Kansas City Star's* literary editor, Thorpe Menn. Although he wrote for the *Star*, Menn hailed from the "Holcomb area" of Kansas. Writing explicitly as a southwest Kansan, Menn argued that *In Cold Blood* staged a contest between a "thousands-of-years-old theory" of

justice and a nascent psychiatric criminology. Titled "Most Chilling is Murder Without Apparent Motive," Menn's review began by insisting, "Capote spent six years on this work to seek out and to point up the significance of that phrase, "murder without apparent motive" (1D).

From the perspective of southwest Kansas, these were fighting words. "Without apparent motive" was Menn's not-so-subtle nod to a social scientific approach to murder. In fact, the very title of Menn's review was borrowed from the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. Seven months before the murder, Drs. Joseph Satten, Karl Menninger, and their associates at Topeka's Menninger Psychiatric Clinic presented a paper at the 115th congress of the American Psychiatric Association in Philadelphia. Titled "Murder Without Apparent Motive," the paper argued that the deprivation of one or both parents, a chaotic family life, or even an early, sadistic exposure to the primal scene, could produce "murder-prone" individuals (51). When Satten visited Garden City after returning from Philadelphia, he concluded that Perry Smith was precisely one of these murder-prone individuals.

Although Satten et al. made no comment in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* on the implications of their findings for capital punishment, Karl Menninger made this linkage explicit. In a series of 1960s lectures given, appropriately, in both New York City and Lawrence, Kansas, Menninger argued that American jurisprudence was characterized by a myopic and ultimately vengeful focus on the particular criminal act. By contrast, "Science, represented by psychiatry,"

looks at all such instances of lawbreaking as pieces in a total pattern of behavior. It asks, Why? What was behind the discovered act which brought the matter to our attention? What pain would drive a man to such a reaction, such a desperate outbreak, and such a deliberate gamble. (26)

This scientific perspective is precisely why Menninger approved of Truman Capote. In the opening chapter of *The Crime of Punishment*, Menninger endorsed Don Carpenter's review of *In Cold Blood*. Because Capote situated the murder in the context of the lives, childhoods, and sexualities of Smith and Hickock, Carpenter was able to recognize in the murderers men not unlike himself. He admits

a particular sense of empathy with the two men Capote writes about in *In Cold Blood*.

When I put the book down, all I could think was that a little more hate, an ounce less stability, and I might have been a murderer. (qtd. in Menninger 7)

Menninger praised this recognition as "brave and honest." No wonder; it affirmed a point that he argued over and again in *The Crime of Punishment*. Namely, the more we situate crime scientifically—that is psychiatrically—the more it becomes difficult to isolate the perpetrator as an autonomous site of violence and the ultimate locus of accountability. And, as accountability is diffused, capital punishment itself becomes the true site of senseless, indefensible violence.

Menninger's fondness for Capote was reciprocated. In the summer of 1960, Capote broke from the writing of *In Cold Blood* to travel from his beach-house in Spain to London's Cumberland hotel. There he spent the greater part of two days with Joseph Satten, who was in London vacationing following his psychoanalysis of Smith and Hickock. In letters to Alvin and Marie Dewey (his closest contacts in southwest Kansas) and Cecil Beaton (fashion photographer and close friend), Capote related that the visit was "quite interesting" and "very helpful" (qtd. in Clarke, *Too Brief* 290). However, these comments severely understate just how "interesting" Capote found his visit with Satten and his confrontation with psychiatry. When Capote wrote the critical fourth section of the book some three years after his London visit, he cited the aforementioned article in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* and drew extensively on his

conversations with Joseph Satten. He described the murder in terms of "mental eclipse," "schizophrenic darkness," and "lapses in ego-control" (299, 302). These descriptions, ranking among the most celebrated portions of *In Cold Blood*, were shot through with the language of Satten and psychiatry.

Capote's reliance on Satten's psychiatry is nowhere more evident than in his account of Perry Smith's storied confession. Following four full pages of psychiatric explanation, Capote turned abruptly to Smith's confession. The confession, in which Smith admitted that he thought Mr. Clutter a "very nice gentleman . . . right up to the moment I cut his throat" (302), was easily the most widely quoted paragraph of the book. *Life* magazine, for example, excerpted the paragraph, printed it a week before the book was released, and called it the "high point" of *In Cold Blood* ("Capricious Flight" 66-67). From Capote's perspective, however, the importance of the confession was that it confirmed Satten's psychiatric approach to crime. After rehearsing the confession, Capote called Smith an "amateur analyst" (302) and concluded that the "circumstances of the crime . . . fit exactly the concept of murder without apparent motive" (301).

From the distance of Emporia, Capote's reliance on social science was celebrated and used as a means of distancing the cities of central Kansas from the disciplinary region of the southwest. In a polemical *Gazette* editorial dedicated to the *Garden City Telegram*'s misreading of Capote, Emporia editor Everett Ray Call suggested that "Garden City critics are *too* close to the story to realize the value of Mr. Capote's book." After reprinting the whole of the *Telegram*'s argument against Capote's celebration of the Smith and Hickock, Call penned an acid reply. Citing the precise paragraph in which Capote used Satten to interpret Smith's confession, Call

argued that Capote's "mastery" resided precisely in his ability to psychologize Hickock and Smith.

The author goes into great detail to describe the wretched, cruel things that happened to Smith during his life. Mr. Capote does such a masterful job that, when Smith tells of cutting Clutter's throat, the reader can understand, almost, why the killer's tormented mind made him commit the murder. The book helps the reader to understand that the murder was not in cold blood at all, but was Smith's subconscious effort to prove his existence as a man to a society that had pretty much ignored him. (4)

By locating the origins of the murder in the societal "pressures" that wreaked havoc on an otherwise "normal childhood," Call read *In Cold Blood* as an indictment of orphanages, mental health programs, and welfare systems (4). Similarly, writing from Hutchinson, Don Kendall argued that Capote's characterization of Smith and Hickock strengthened his arguments against capital punishment (6).

Comments like these from central Kansas were precisely what those closest to ground zero feared: Capote-the-social-scientist had dispersed the blame, diffused it out into society, and left Hickock and Smith as Menninger would have had them: victims of a cruel society. This arrangement was not lost on local readers, and it formed the core of their objection to Capote and his texts. "By the end" of *In Cold Blood*, Menn argued, a "reader knows exactly how all of Perry's human sensibilities became calloused. It's the old story of little boy knocked around by cruel world." From the perspective of Garden City, characterizing Smith as a boy "knocked around by a cruel world" signaled an intolerable diffusion of responsibility and a cowardly retreat from capital punishment. Thus Menn's conclusion: Pyschiatry "doesn't answer for all" (1D).

The *Dodge City Daily Globe* and the *Garden City Telegram* also objected to the psychologization of the murderers. This is the *Globe*:

What irritates us most is the chatty way he refers to that pair of murders [sic] as Perry and Dick. Possibly it is necessary to his technique, to get people to know them as fallible and frail human beings, but to us they are not Perry and Dick. We just don't feel that way about them and we never will. (4)

Likewise the *Garden City Telegram* objected to *Life* magazine's dramatic announcement of the publication of *In Cold Blood*. Published days before the Random House release, the *Life* feature quoted the same Satten-Smith paragraph and, critically, it personalized the men who were known locally only as perpetrators. *Life* spoke of high school sports, commendable report cards, alcoholic parents, decorated veterans, and, above all, two men who had at other times made good despite the hand dealt them ("The Two Killers" 65). In the words of the *Telegram*, the killers "rated almost a double-page play in the current issue of *Life* magazine." This was simply too much for Garden City editor Bill Brown.

Two murderers who took rather than contributed to society have been put in a national spotlight. . . . The large splash of their pictures in such a magazine as *Life*, in our opinion, exemplified this over-proportionate emphasis on the two criminals. ("The Irony of Crime" 4)

As if to correct the record, Brown insisted that Richard Eugene Hickock and Perry Edward Smith—he used their full names—were "killers . . . whose lives ended on the gallows at the Kansas State Penitentiary last April" ("The Irony of Crime" 4).

Like the *Telegram*'s objection to the personalization of the murderers, the *Dodge City Daily Globe*'s objection to Christian names was rooted in a commitment to capital punishment.

Immediately following the *Globe's* assertion that "we just don't feel that way about them," the editorial made their concerns about jurisprudence explicit: "We also have some doubts how this is going to come out. It may turn into a great case of murder—Kansas murdering a pair of unfortunates—in the great tradition of 'nothing is anybody's fault.'" Here the anxieties are plain: murderers rendered fragile by the "great traditions" of psychiatry threaten to precisely reverse the operations of justice. Knowledge tripping up power once more. The *Globe* concluded: "Well, they were no great ornaments to the society which produced them, Hickock and Smith. Some persons are inclined to blame society and not them, but we find it difficult to go all the way with that." Insisting that Smith and Hickock could not be reduced to "ornaments" of a society was simultaneously an indictment of Capote, a swipe at the nascent criminal psychology that had lately invaded Finney County from the northeast, and an insistence that accountability lie ultimately with the perpetrators rather than society itself: "And society has a right to say 'there are some things which are simply too terrible to do and if you do them, we will eliminate you from society'" ("Shows Great Research" 6).

Foucault should have cited the *Telegram* or the *Daily Globe*. Like Foucault would do in the mid seventies, the citizens of southwest Kansas called for a return to the body. Like Foucault, they too recognized the dangerous admixture of social science and jurisprudence. They needed no philosopher to tell them that power presupposed the "correlative constitution of a field of knowledge" (Foucault 27). And they too sought to define themselves with the help of institutions that ministered only, and precisely, to the body. Foucault may have gone to Folsom Street and Kansans to Lansing, but both were seeking haven from the disruptive knowledge of social science.³

At stake in southwest Kansas, then, was a competing set of networks established and held together by *In Cold Blood*. Never before had social science so clearly challenged the mores of southwest Kansas. Psychiatry had been out there for forty years, thriving at a distance of 318 miles. When Capote cut and pasted Joseph Satten's psychoanalytic treatment of the murderers into the heart of *In Cold Blood*, he brought it near and set it in action against local habits of justice. This was intolerable. As a means of resistance, locals offered a counter network, one in which ties to Lansing were strengthened to the degree that ties to Topeka were cut. That is to say, southwest Kansans used Capote and *In Cold Blood* to rearticulate the relationships they held with various institutions, ideologies, and cities. There is nothing *local* about this reaction. Indeed, Capote and *In Cold Blood* were nothing if not conduits, providing southwest Kansans the egress they needed to define their own region by virtue of ties that stretched the length of the state. This is the essence of region making: a spot of land being given meaning by its placement in a broader network of institutions and ideologies.

In the case at hand, the strength and direction of the ties binding southwest Kansas into a broader network was ultimately a function of a preoccupation with discipline. As the citizens of southwest Kansas disarticulated themselves from the state's urban centers, they returned repeatedly to Capote's invocations of social science, and these had relevance only because they threatened the personal culpability of the criminal and the legitimacy of capital punishment. Thus were Capote, *In Cold Blood*, the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, and the State Penitentiary in Lansing placed in a network that gave meaning to southwest Kansas as a region.

A Modern Region

From the distance of central Kansas, Dick Hickock and Perry Smith fade from view. In their place stands the now larger-than-life image of Truman Capote. To be sure, Capote was certainly important locally. Without a doubt, nearly everyone in the tri-city area knew his name by January of 1966. Yet the Capote of Southwestern Kansas was a fundamentally different Capote than the one who appeared at a distance of two hundred miles. Locally, Capote was foremost a writer and a researcher. Accordingly, his place in the local discourse was figured always and only in relationship to the object of his work: the Clutters and their killers. In other words, locally speaking, Capote was not larger-than-life. Quite the opposite: he was judged by his fidelity to life as local residents experienced it. This basis for judgment resulted in the much-repeated ledgers of historical fidelity and the insistence that Capote engage the murderers with the proper form of knowledge.

From the cities of central Kansas, Capote is a self-justifying entity. No longer the object of historical accountancy, no longer measured against the events of November 1959 or April 1965, Capote himself became the touchstone through which the Clutter murders were given meaning. This is what I mean when I say that Capote was larger-than-life: from the perspective of Hutchinson, Wichita, Emporia, and Topeka, Capote himself became something of a ground zero; an Archimedean platform upon which rested an aspiring metropolitan Kansas. In a word, Capote became a celebrity.

Not coincidentally, the cities of central Kansas were in dire need of celebrity. Historian Craig Miner writes that in 1950s Kansas there was "heavy pressure to be 'modern' and to [thereby] live down the legacy of Kansas's provincialism" (324). In the cities of central Kansas, this "passion to be modern" (334) was everywhere evident. Driven by anxieties over Kansas's provincial reputation, the citizens of central Kansas pointed to the construction of dams, the

utilization of aquifers, and the creation of "ultra-modern express highways" to recast the meaning of their state (334, 327, 331). This "passion for modernity" is the essential context for understanding Capote's regional reception. In the cities of central Kansas, that passion fostered two conditions under which Capote could be received on very different terms than he was on the high plains. First, it fostered a Kansas version of cosmopolitanism. Cultural geographer James R. Shortridge writes, "If Wichita people recently have focused less on their connections to Kansas and more on those to the broader world, who could blame them" (306)? Shortridge reads the *Wichita Eagle's* 1996 decision to restrict its circulation to the immediate thirteen-county area as a "symbolic demonstration" of a long-cultivated independence: the passion for modernity had "reduced long-standing ties between Wichita and its hinterland" (306-07, 309). Although this cosmopolitanism was less pronounced in Hutchinson, Emporia, and Topeka, the reception history of Truman Capote suggests that it thrived there too.

Second, the "passion for modernity" created a desire for cultural growth to match the technological growth evidenced in the dams, elevators, and highways. On October 1, 1965, the *Wichita Eagle* gave eloquent testimony to this desire. Well aware that the city could no longer depend on its central location and favorable climate to attract industry, the *Eagle* called for cultural development: "Industrial development depends in large part on the recreational and cultural facilities a community or region offers. Kansas needs to do more in these areas" ("More Than Location" A4). Capote was thus the perfect mix: an international celebrity in which the cosmopolitan yearnings of central Kansas could be affirmed and a cultural icon of the first order. In the person of Capote, the cities of central Kansas saw their preferred meaning of Kansas dramatically confirmed.

For these reasons, somewhere in the range of 150 to 200 miles from Holcomb, Truman Capote underwent a qualitative transformation. No longer the social scientist who brought with him the avant-garde theories of Topeka, Capote was now an east-coast jet-setter whose appearance in Kansas was understood as the culmination of a no-longer-provincial state. Nowhere was the contrast between the competing modes of Truman Capote clearer than the coverage of Capote's October 1965 return to Kansas. At that time, midway through the *New Yorker's* serialization, Capote was hard at work prepping for the massive Random House release of *In Cold Blood*. A key component in those preparations was the aforementioned massive twenty-one page spread about the Clutters, Capote, and the murderers that ran in *Life* magazine one week before the book was released. The making of this spread brought Capote, New York City photographers, *Life* copywriters, and Random House publishers to Holcomb, KS for a three-day visit from October 4-6, 1965.

On October 7, the *Hutchinson News* printed two front-page pictures of Capote. One of them is a picture of photographer Richard Avedon taking a picture of Capote (see image 1). Perfectly capturing Kansans' need for modernity, the photo portrays Capote as he appeared to central Kansans: through the lens of a celebrity. It is only by looking through Richard Avedon—that is, through the aperture formed by his angled right arm—that Capote appears at all. By 1965, Avedon was himself a signal of celebrity. In 1959, he and Capote co-authored *Observations*, a book filled entirely with celebrity portraits. By the time Avedon arrived in Kansas, he was much more than a photographer. He was also a marker of celebrity. It is no wonder that Washington D.C.'s Corcoran Gallery of Art titled its 2008 Avedon exhibit "Portraits of Power." More to the point, it is no wonder that when, in 1966, a forty-three year old Avedon went directly from a shoot in Rome to a shoot in Kansas, arriving "stylishly attired, wearing [a] sweater that smacked

of Italy" (Britt 1), the *Hutchinson News* described him as one of the "world's 10 greatest photographers" (Britt 1) and the *Wichita Eagle* called him "one of the top photographers in the country" (Valenzuela 4B). In both papers, he functioned as a celebrity lens through which Truman Capote could appear as evidence for a modern, urban Kansas.



□ Richard Avedon Photographing Truman Capote.
Credit: The Hutchinson News

The texts that subtended the Avedon-framed pictures offered a longhand version of the iconography: a region seen through the prism of Capote's celebrity. This is the *Hutchinson News*:

This week had a macabre, unreal quality, as though it were being filmed by Fellini on an Italian plain suddenly peopled by the jet set. Here were the personages, the writer, the photographer, the magazine reporter, the book publisher. Here were the cocktail parties, the name-dropping, the interviews, the picture taking. (A, "Capote in Kansas (3)" 6)

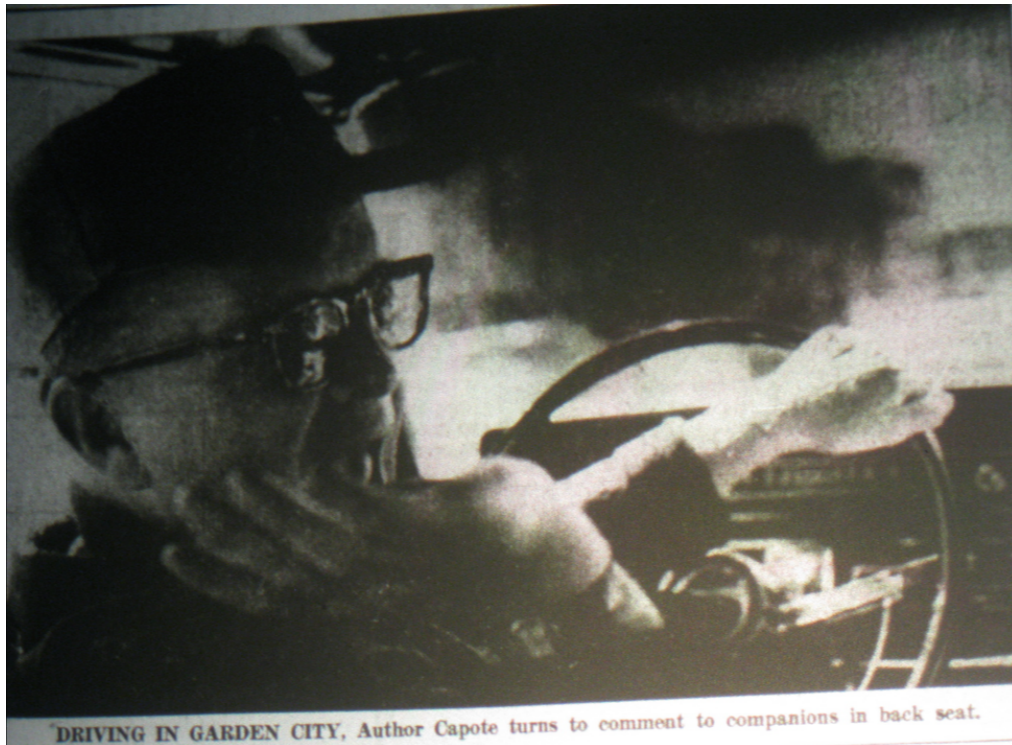
The *Emporia Gazette* put it this way: "Capote is an Easterner He travels in lofty social circles and recently escorted Jackie Kennedy to a party. . . . Considering his background, he might have been so enamored with the East that the Mid-West would appear crude and unattractive to him." The *Gazette* emphasized, however, that Capote was not so enamored. He "liked Kansas." Moreover, "He's the sort of man who will tell his Eastern friends in no uncertain terms. Some of them may want to come out and learn first hand why Capote is such an ardent booster" ("Capote Likes Kansas" 4).

It is worth emphasizing that Capote's 1965 visit to southwestern Kansas registered *only* in central Kansas. That is, his visit was a matter of concern only in that middle distance between the local and national coverage of *In Cold Blood*. Nationally, Capote's 1965 visit was wholly invisible. The *Life* spread, which was, in the most material sense possible, the national product of Capote's October 1965 Kansas visit, left no trace of its original fabrication. In *Life*, *In Cold Blood* is a national phenomenon: instigated by the *New York Times*, serialized by the *New Yorker*, published by Random House, and circulated by the Book-of-the-Month Club, it signaled Capote's rise to the front of "American letters" ("Horror Spawns a Masterpiece" 59). The oversized picture of Capote wearing a soft-sided army hat under which *Life* disseminated its

nationalized tale would have been immediately recognizable to newspaper readers in Hutchinson and Wichita.⁴ Just three months earlier, similar pictures of Capote wearing a similar hat had appeared in their papers too, only with this difference: in the *Hutchinson News* and the *Wichita Eagle*, Capote's hat shots were contextualized both by the hustle and bustle of local city life and the markers of celebrity for which he was made to stand (see images 2 and 3). By contrast, to help the hatted Capote find his place in "American letters," *Life* removed the key contextual markers by which he had, three months earlier, been located in a network that stretched from central Kansas to Central Park, and put him instead on a dirt road. In the migration of the hat shot from the *Wichita Eagle* and *Hutchinson News* to *Life* magazine, we witness the cost of nationalization. The networks Kansans deployed—the networks in which Capote was both a symbol and means of modernization—were gone, replaced by a dirt road leading nowhere. From the perspective of the Kansas cities, it must have seemed that "American Letters" had no place for a modern Kansas, as if a dirt road was their only passage to "America."



□ Truman Capote and Richard Avedon in Garden City, Kansas.
Credit: The Wichita Eagle



- Truman Capote in Kansas.
Credit: The Hutchinson News

In southwest Kansas, the story of October 1965 is slightly more complex. Amazingly, the visit registered not at all in the *Dodge City Daily Globe* or Liberal's *Southwest Daily Times*. Six years earlier, both of these papers documented the Clutter murder in exacting detail; six months later, both of these papers would devote significant space to reviewing *In Cold Blood*. But in October of 1965, neither of these papers found anything newsworthy about Capote or his entourage. Unlike *Life*, they had no investment in Capote's new place in the national writing scene. Unlike Hutchinson, Wichita, Emporia, and Topeka, they had no interest in leveraging Capote's celebrity status for their own psychological needs.

Although the *Garden City Telegram* did mention Capote's sudden reemergence in their midst, their coverage was entirely dedicated to a careful reading of those portions of "In Cold

Blood” which had thus far been serialized. From the distance of central Kansas, this certainly must have seemed a provincial account. Consumed with Capote’s historical fidelity and his “ontological probing” into the psychological character of the killers, the *Telegram* wholly ignored the fact that, as the *Hutchinson News* had put it, “Fame, in the person of author Truman Capote,” had come to Kansas (Britt 1). Indeed, the *Telegram* did not even mention Avedon, cocktail parties, or the Capote jet set: staples of the coverage in central Kansas (Brown, “In Cold Blood” 1).

Forgotten nationally and ignored locally, Capote’s 1965 visit to Kansas thrived in the cities of central Kansas. There every last detail of his visit was covered in copious detail: the clothes he wore, the shops he visited, the local wares he consumed, the company he kept, and the train on which he left town. This was not simply reportage; it was paparazzi-style blanket coverage appropriate only for a celebrity. This coverage was driven by the central-Kansas need to recast the meaning of Kansas and thereby cast off forever the image of a provincial state. Unsurprisingly, it mapped an entirely different network from the one advanced closer to ground zero. It was a cosmopolitan network, with links stretching well beyond Topeka and Lansing. From central Kansas, Capote’s sheer presence in to the southwest—far more than anything he wrote—connected the state to New York City, the Kennedy’s, cocktail parties and the east-coast jet set. Capote linked Kansas to modernity. These ties were longer, more tenuous, and they required an entirely different Capote from the network of southwestern Kansas. But, just as certainly, they were held in place by Truman Capote. As he did in the southwest, Capote provided citizens of central Kansas the egress required to patch themselves to larger movements and thus create for themselves a regional sensibility.

Conclusion

Drawing on Douglass Reichert Powell and Doreen Massey, I argued in the introduction that regions are defined by the ways in which particular geographic places intersect with “broader configurations of history, politics, and culture.” As Powell puts it, a region is “a rhetoric that connects specific local sites to a variety of other kinds of place constructions” (28). So understood, there is nothing local about regions. For this reason, the glorification of the local (or the global) threatens our ability to see regions. Regions are rhetorics; to the extent we focus exclusively on, say, local practices or specific spatial sites, regions will fade from view. What is needed is a reading practice that foregrounds the links that connect specific sites with distant cities and abstract ideologies. For in a very real sense, if regions can be pinpointed, they exist only in these links—these connections that bind “place constructions” of various sorts into a network. Regional hermeneutics is just such a reading practice. As a means of concluding, let me offer three preliminary and overlapping conclusions regarding regional hermeneutics as a reading practice. Each of these conclusions entails the other two, and in practice it is difficult to say where one stops and the next begins. For the sake of methodological clarity, however, I present them here in serial form.

First, regional hermeneutics privilege articulation over interpretation. Although Lawrence Grossberg has identified this shift from interpretation to articulation as an essential move of cultural studies writ large (“Cultural Studies” 4), it is particularly important for regional hermeneutics. Why? As Bruno Latour has made plain, it is not, methodologically speaking, easy to explain how specific sites are linked to other place constructions. Latour puts the problem like this:

From the infant speech act is it really possible to go to the ‘structure’ of language? From the plaintiff case is there any way to go to a ‘system’ of law? From the floor of the

sweatshop is there any canal that goes to a 'capitalist mode of production' or to an 'empire'? (167)

From the rural Kansas prairie is there any canal that goes to modernity, capital punishment, or the New York jet set?

The answer to Latour's list of questions must be a provisional "yes." Although there exist no objective connections ("canals") awaiting discovery, such connections are constantly being created and recreated by rhetors with vested interests. Indeed, this is precisely what articulation is. Following Ernesto Laclau, Stuart Hall, and Lawrence Grossberg, I understand articulation as the rhetorical forging of temporary and contingent links. In Grossberg's words, "Articulation links this practice to that effect, this text to that meaning, this meaning to that reality" (54). In the case at hand, southwest Kansans articulated *In Cold Blood* to psychiatry and capital punishment; central Kansans articulated it to celebrity and modernity. In both cases, as Kansans received the text they routed it in such a way that it would speak to the broader political issues about which they cared. Rather than focus on what a text means—or, perhaps, as way of figuring out it means—regional hermeneutics insists that we give our primary attention to the ways texts are articulated by its readers.

From this perspective, readers are neither wholly imposed upon by forces beyond their control nor are they autonomous sites of resistance against the impositions of mass culture. Indeed, in the case at hand, the imposition of mass culture was precisely the mechanism through which Kansas readers found agency. By rearticulating the products of mass culture (Capote no less than *In Cold Blood*), 1960s Kansans were able to fashion regions of their own making. Otherwise put, *In Cold Blood* may have imposed a regional sensibility on Kansans, but through the process of rearticulation, it also provided the possibility of counter regions. To reveal these,

regional hermeneutics is concerned less with matters of interpretation and more with matters of articulation.

Second, this attention to the articulation of texts must be complicated by a spatial variable. Indeed, articulation is itself a spatial analytic; Grossberg refers to it as a form of cartography, a mode of mapping reality (*We Gotta Get Out of Here* 57). Because no articulation is ever final—because there can be “no single structure or dimension of human life which stitches everything into place so that its patterns are indelibly sewn into the fabric of history” (Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of Here* 55)—attention to various articulations will allow us to trace the borders of a given region, to mark off the boundaries in which a particular articulation gained traction. Consider the case of 1960s Kansas. From county to county across the state of Kansas, critics could not even agree on what texts, what Capote, what places, or what dates were central to the meaning of *In Cold Blood*. A social scientist here, a celebrity there; there were as many Capotes (and *In Cold Bloods*) as there were critics in Kansas. The borders between these articulations mark the borders of the Kansas regions.

Such an observation entails a distinctively postmodern conception of both author and text: we must consider both as “discursive events.” As Foucault so powerfully argued in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, the assumption of a stable, pre-discursive author—an author that remains everywhere the same—blinds us to the “raw material of history.” In Kansas terms, the assumption of an autonomous Capote—even the assumption that Capote is a person rather than an event—blinds us to the historical fact that he was articulated differently in different places. Likewise the assumption that *In Cold Blood* was the same book everywhere it was read blinds us to the fact that it too was articulated differently across the state of Kansas. Only by treating Capote and *In Cold Blood* as strictly “discursive events” may we see the ways in which each was

articulated in different places. Foucault writes, "To reveal in all its purity the space in which discursive events are deployed is . . . to leave oneself free to describe the interplay of relations within and outside it" (8, 29).

Finally, regional hermeneutics casts texts and authors as conduits that make possible the connections essential to region making. Latour insists, "If you wish to go from one site to another, then you have to pay the full cost of relation, connection, displacement, and information. No lifts, accelerations, or shortcuts are allowed" (176-77). That is, critics cannot simply assert that modernity or capital punishment is the proper context for making sense of rural Kansas without showing the precise ways in which the two are connected. For Latour, it is incumbent upon the critic to specify the "vehicles" through which the "world is being brought inside" local interactions (179).

In this regard, I take the reading practices of ordinary Kansans as a challenge and corrective to my own critical practice. I thought they would do what I have always done: read the text and interpret it, quote it, and contest it. They did all these things, but they also did something else: they used the text and its author as vehicles to connect their own patch of land with a wide range of institutions and ideologies. For them, the text was less a repository of meanings to be explained and more a conduit or a pathway by which Kansans could bind themselves to Lansing or modernity, Topeka or capital punishment. In theoretical terms, if regions exist in the networks that connect particular patches of land to broader configurations of history, regional hermeneutics stresses that these connections are made possible by texts and authors understood as conduits. As Latour argues, the local and the global appear only as we isolate the "tiny conduits" (like texts) through which they circulate. The same holds true for regions; to see them our reading practices must be attuned to the ways texts/authors functions as vehicles.

One local paper wished that Capote “had written his book about a crime up in Maine or at least somewhere far, far away” (“Sometimes Forgetting” 4). That is an understandable impulse; Capote punctuated the ordinary flow of life in southwest Kansas for over eight years. Moreover, through Capote’s presence and his work, Random House and Columbia Pictures were able to disseminate a regional sensibility imported from the coasts and imposed on Kansans. Of course the *Dodge City Daily Globe* would have preferred Capote go to Maine. Had he done so, however, Kansans would have been deprived of a powerful means of counter region making. For Kansans used Capote and his book to forge symbolic ties to New York City and social science. And, as Powell reminds us, these ties are not insignificant. In them—and nowhere else—it is possible to find regions.

NOTES

¹ “In Cold Blood” (*New Yorker* serial) was published in the fall of 1965. *In Cold Blood* (Random House novel) was published in January of 1966. Kansans often—but not always—conflated these two texts. To better capture this conflation, I use *In Cold Blood* (no quotation marks; no italics) to refer to both texts at once.

² In a telling oversight, the most extensive Capote bibliography lists only two Kansas reviews of *In Cold Blood* (Bryer, 239-269). This despite the fact that nearly every small-town Kansas newspaper south of the 39th parallel devoted space to the book.

³ In a separate essay, I argue that, for Foucault, the bathhouse stands as a principle of resistance to abstract modes of intellectual engagement (112).

⁴ Although I was unable to obtain permission to reprint this photograph, it is available online.

http://www.google.com/books?id=CkwEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA58&lr=&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false.

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